

# CRITICAL STUDIES

*For*

*M.A. and B.A. Students of English Literature  
in Indian Universities*

**Vol. XXI**

**HARDY'S**

## **TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES**

*By*

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## PREFACE

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## HARDY'S TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES

### I. The Story of *Tess*

Giving the story of the novel, Ruth Mecall writes in *One Hundred World's Best Novels Condensed*: 'Good morning, Sir John'. The bewilderment of a dusty, threadbare peddler thus addressed was speedily converted into a majestic pride upon learning that he, John Durbeyfield of Marlott, was actually a lineal descendant of the noble family of D'Urberville.

"And no sooner had Joan, his handsome, shallow-minded wife, the easy-going mother of his many children, heard of her exalted estate than her romantic soul began secretly to devise a brilliant and fitting alliance for her beautiful young daughter. To which end *Tess* was artfully prevailed upon to seek work in a wealthy upstart family of the same illustrious name.

"And so the innocent child, whose single-minded desire was to mend the broken fortunes of her family, became poultry-keeper for a blind woman of spurious title and alternate prey for her son, a dissolute wretch, you Alec D'Urberville. After a while back to Marlott came the disillusioned girl, where she lived in a gray seclusion until her wizened little baby's death.

"But after several bitter years of heart-searching, *Tess* determined to leave home again—this time to be dairymaid at Talbothays, a large, fertile farm in the Valley of the Great Dairies. And here, too, was a young man, the youngest son of a stern and zealous divine of the old school. Angel Clare had sadly disappointed his father, first by non-conformist views and then by sincere scruples against taking orders. So now, in process of becoming gentleman farmer, he was specialising at various farms. Cultured, idealistic, sympathetic, he seemed to *Tess* a demigod, and though she had sworn herself to celibacy, the enforced propinquity ripened into intimacy and drifted into love. Together they went afield in the wonderful dewy dawns and the warm summer afternoons found them making butter and cheese in the cool, white dairyhouse. The birds sang for them and for them the stars shone, and the whole verdant valley, teeming with richness and increase, gave up its odorous vapours. Young, happy, pagan-hearted, the universe was theirs.



Her quick mind grew in contact with his, and her warm, rich voice lost its country speech and unconsciously adopted his cultured accents.

"Tess's specter loomed but vaguely now, until love's honest declaration brought her to poignant realisation of her situation in this man-made world. But all withdrawals were overcome by Clare's gentle insistence; all attempts at revelation were lightly thwarted. Finally, within a week of the wedding-day which she had reluctantly set, her resolution takes shape in writing—a four-page confession is breathlessly thrust under his door. Ironically concealed under the carpet it lies until Tess, with a sudden late intuition on her wedding morn, discovers its hiding-place and tears it up. In a lumbering old relic of coach days (symbolic of an ancient D'Urberville legend of crime) Tess and Angel are carried to church, and upon their final departure a white cock crows thrice. 'An afternoon crow', and the dairy folk shake their heads at the evil omen.

"To an old farm-house—a derelict of an ancient D'Urberville mansion—in ready range of a model mill, Clare with a sense of the practical and the romantic, takes his lovely bride. From the panelled wall outside her door two old D'Urberville portraits gleam evilly and Clare and Tess shiver as they trace a subtle likeness to her own in the malignant yet noble features. Before the glowing fire the adoring bridegroom, his wife's hand clasped in his, tells the story of his one aberrations, of his forty-eight hours' dissipation with a Scarlet woman, and confidently craves her pardon which Tess only too delighted to grant; and, with the first real gleam of hope, unfolds her own sad story...

"The wanton action of a man of maturity—the deceived innocence of an ignorant child! And yet, the man cannot forgive the woman! All the rigid rules of his forebears, all the domination of an unjust social order, grip him. Angel Clare, the prophet of emancipation, no longer exists. For several days they lead a formal, isolated existence. Tess, whose sole wish is to please her idol, acquiesces in his attitude, and, after a first wild outburst at the injustice, does nothing to exonerate herself, and her one chance for reinstatement is blighted by the mocking witness of the vindictive portraits. No chaste-minded, unsophisticated peasant maid she is, but the last dregs of a

decadent stock! A separation, temporary at least, is decided upon, and while rages afar Tess again creeps home. Joan, after the first bitter reproaches for the mad disobedience of her repeated injunctions of secrecy, treats the affair with her usual fatal light-heartedness; but the harsh words of the father in a drunken moment of excessive ancestral pride caused a dignified departure with the conciliatory donation of half her means of subsistence and the intimation that she is rejoining her husband.

"Determined, however, to make no appeal to Clare's family, Tess easily finds summer employment among the farms; but with the coming of winter and too lavish contributions to her family's support, privation stares her in the face. Day after day she wanders on until at length on the high, chalky tablelands, in a great drab field of desolation, she finds the meanest, most arduous of tasks rendered tenfold difficult by a churlish boor of an employer in all the rancour of an ancient grudge against her. In the stinging rain and the chilling snow she toils unceasingly, uncomplainingly, living wholly in the hope of her husband's return. Songs that he loved she practises, the sweet, gay notes contrasting sadly with her tragic lips and great, sorrowing eyes. At length, distraught by the continued silence, she bravely decides to seek news of him from his parents, and walks the long, tremulous miles to Emminster Vicarage. Of rare spiritual as well as physical endowments, she would have undoubtedly received a welcome at the benevolent old clergyman and his wife, but an empty house reverberates to her knocking, and while she unobtrusively awaits, their return from church she overhears a wayside conversation between Angel's two exemplary brothers that sends her homeward with rended heart.

"The voice of a 'ranter' triumphantly consigning a barnful of rustics to eternal damnation caused Tess to pause a moment in a doorway, and there on a platform of corn-bags, in sanctimonious side-whiskers and semi-clerical blacks, stood Alec D'Urberville. Animalism had yielded to fanaticism and the bold, roving eye now gleamed with a ferocious righteousness. As she passed on down the lane he came after her, imploring forgiveness and offering redemption. Repulse after repulse failed to deter Alec, who persisted day after day, at first with a



marriage licence and holy words, and then his formal passion uncontrolled revived by Tess's compelling beauty, his new-found religion dropped from him like a cloak, the convert disappeared, and all the arts of man and devil were employed to ensnare the girl. And poor, hopeless Tess, grinding on under a benumbing strain, was in more danger than her scorn of the man could realize. Finally, her father's death, resulting in the eviction of her family from their home, precipitates Tess's doom, and as a last desperate reparation to her helpless mother and sisters she yields, with a fatalistic calm, to the inevitable.

"To Sandbourne, a gay watering-place, a melancholy specter of a man, wasted by illness and regret, comes in search of his lost bride, and in a fashionable boarding house Clare finds Tess and learns the agonising truth. Just beyond the town she overtook him, her eyes wild and trancelike, her whole body as if bereft of soul and will. 'I have killed him...he taunted me...he called you by foul name...I owed it to you and I owed it to myself...it came to me as a shining light that I should get you back that way.'

"With a final realization of the immensity of her love and the piteous plight it had brought upon her, Clare held out tender, protecting arms, and together they wandered through the untrodden ways like two children—the world and its retribution quite forgot.

"For five days they continued in this idyllic state, and on the sixth night Tess half jestingly claimed sanctuary among the conspicuous ruins of the ancient pagan temple to the sun at Stonehenge. With the dawn came the guardians of the law, looming dark against the silvery horizon. In a grim, inexorable circle they waited until the sun's level rays, relentlessly reminiscent of a bygone sacrificial day, fell upon another victim, and Tess, deserted by all the gods, awoke. Quietly she faced her captors. 'I am ready,' she said.

"Eight metallic strokes shiver the morning air and from a nearby hill a stricken figure rivets involuntary eye on the flag-staff of a sullen cage of a building. For Angel the prison where Tess is confined has at this fatal hour a deadly and significant fascination. Slowly, silently, a black square creeps as the pole and flutters chill against the morning sky.

"Tess, more sinned against than sinning, has paid the great penalty."

## 2. A Critical Summary of Tess

Giving a critical summary of *Tess*, Duffin has observed in his book, *Thomas Hardy*: "In *Tess* we find Hardy putting all his strength into an opening chapter. The method of presenting the necessary facts about the D'Urberville descent, the racy humour of the dialogue, the picture of John Durbeyfield: all are beyond praise. The second chapter is an equally beautiful piece of work, and more varied. Beginning with a description of the secluded and languorous vale of Blackmoor, in which lies Marlott, Tess's home village, it goes on to present a group of girls and women, dancing according to ancient custom; their dancing is disturbed by the richly comic passing of John Durbeyfield, singing drunk, in the carriage he has hired to transport his new splendours. This provides an introduction to Tess, who is one of the dancing maidens. Not much is made of her yet, but attention is drawn to her freshness, her innocent eyes, the phrases, of childhood that yet linger over the 'bouncing handsome womanliness' that is hers at the age of seventeen. Hardy's making Tess the offspring of the father we have seen and the mother we are shortly to see reminds us of Candida and the equally impossible Burgess. But whereas Shaw's point is that education and environment can obliterate heredity, Hardy's is that in the absence of such education and environment and ameliorative environment heredity is everything. But the wealth of this chapter is not exhausted: presently comes Angel Clare, 'hiking' through the village, and pausing in the evening light to watch the dancing: and the two star-crossed ones have their premonitory wistful first sight of each other. The whole chapter is seasoned with quiet ironic comment.

"Now comes ugliness. The next chapter passes to a depressing picture of the Durbeyfield ménage, the immediate stock and surroundings from which Tess sprang. Nothing of the idyllic side of country life here! No detail is spared of the depravity of Mrs. Durbeyfield—considered as a mother: she is likeable enough in other connections; a happy child, Tess calls her. Ugliness deepens when Joan Durbeyfield and her



husband are found soaking in the public house, not a decent village inn but a fusty bedroom with furtive after-hours drinking going on. Here, of course, is a first explanation of what is to come. Tess has grown up in this household, with its slipshod morality, has been brought up by these slack-twisted parents. She is pointedly said to take after her mother in physical build. She is pretty, ignorant, easily moved. The result is arithmetical, as one of the elderly boozers hints.

"And then, to lift us out of squalor, comes the story of the death of Prince the horse, with its pathos and heroism, its beauty and humour, and that modern beauty-humour synthesis that we find again in the poems. Its practical result is to make it necessary for Tess to begin earning money, and she is persuaded to apply to her 'rich relation', Mrs. D'Urberville, who lives with her son Alec at the big house called The Slopes. Thus all that has gone before has been leading up to Alec D'Urberville. And we have had a hint of Angel Clare. So the whole tragedy is implicit in the first few chapters.

"These D'Urbervilles are nothing but stokes who have bought up the old mansion and adopted the old name. Alec is twenty-four, swarthy, with full lips and a bold rolling eye. Hardy speaks again of the attribute in Tess upon which the rolling eye at once fell 'a luxuriance of aspect inherited from her mother'; and, moved by the impending tragedy, he is inspired to some wonderful paragraphs on the cruel irony of Tess's fate. The mere passage of events brings Tess nearer to D'Urberville's embrace. Tess herself feels this obscurely, but her mother has put into her mind the idea of marriage with D'Urberville as a very likely possibility, and though Tess is angry at the question being talked about, she is naturally not repelled by the idea. Her state of mind is marvellously shown, but she does, obviously cannot—behave otherwise than any decent country girl would behave. An emotional crisis is brought on when D'Urberville woos her with a furiously driven horse and trap.

"So Tess looks after Mrs. D'Urberville's fowls and Alec D'Urberville follows her about. It is all rather sordid and worse is yet to come. Tess joins—with it but not of it—a Saturday night drinking pilgrimage to Chaseborough. A vulgar-comic squabble arises, in the course of which Car Darch,

D'Urberville's last wench, attacks Tess as her supplanter. Tess is rescued by D'Urberville, who carries her off on horseback into the woods. She is tired out, so he puts her down on the leaves, wrapped in his great coat. She falls asleep, and wakes to find herself; as the next 'phase' says 'maiden no more'.

"There was every possible excuse for Tess. She was badly parented, badly brought up, and had been told over and over again that D'Urberville would marry her ('if not afore, than after', as Mrs. Durbeyfield said, though not in Tess's hearing). She was 'a little dazed' by him, and half-believed he 'loved' her. She was only seventeen, she was tired out and asleep. All this Hardy shows, with great clearness—shows it inevitable that Tess should 'fall'—in other words should undergo a simple natural experience before she was married. He now goes on to show how, through 'ideas' of one kind and another existing in the minds of her fellows, this simple natural experience brought appalling misery and tragedy into several lives.

"That is the moral side of the matter. From the point of view of pure art this is what happens. Hardy, the creator says: Here is something, a human soul, unpromising enough though with promising features. Watch while I make something greater, out of it. To do this I can add either a happy element or an unhappy one. Either, if of the required quality, will produce the effect I intend. And thus like a dispassionate scientist, he holds up his pipette containing the happy element—Angel Clare; but after a moment decides no, and adds the other instead.

"In the second 'phase' squalor is put aside, and beauty and dignity begin; out of the squalor rises the tragic tale of Tess. She is indeed—so swiftly, so miraculously—a greater Tess. Her handling of D'Urberville is magnificent—as if she were a real D'Urberville princess, he says. She feels the vital truth, that it is because there is not love between them that what has happened is 'loathsome'. At her mother's reproach she turns passionately upon her; 'O mother, my mother! How could I be expected to know? I was a child when I left this house four months ago'. The remainder of this section is devoted to a showing of the period of suspended animation that Tess endured until the death of her baby a few months old;



this phase closes with the classic picture of the baptism and subsequent burial of Sorrow the Undesired. The section includes, however, a great deal of argument designed to palliate Tess's 'offence'. Hardy doubtless felt this to be necessary, since the 'offence' was, at that time, of a furiously controversial nature, with the argument chiefly on one side; otherwise the length to which he carries his defence is inartistic, though we would not miss one point of his wise and tender reasoning. The substance of his defence will be considered later. At the moment it is desirable to note the suggestion that Tess's experience was a liberal education. If Angel Clare could have felt that! The suggestion is an answer to any picture of the scientist and his two dropping-tubes. Clare and happiness from the beginning would have been best for Tess, but suffering with Alec D'Urberville first, followed by happiness with Angel Clare would have proved a truly wonderful result.

"But life is irrepressible, and Tess makes a fresh start: hope, youth, spirit rise again and give us the beautiful 'phase' called the Rally. We have some marvellous colour-photography of the two vales, the one she is leaving and the one she goes to—the Valley of the Great-Dairies, watered by the River From. As she comes down from the heights on to 'Talbothays' Dairy she breaks into the sublime canticle: 'O ye Sun and Moon.....bless ye the Lord, praise him and magnify him for ever'!

"And presently comes the discovery that Fate has sent her to the farm where Angel Clare is working as a pupil. Hardy gives us an adequate sketch of him—fixed abstracted eyes, sensitive and delicate but firm mouth, nebulous, vague, preoccupied. The hard logical deposit that runs through his mental constitution is described later: this is not to be confused with a logical habit of mind, which he eventually has not, for he has been through precisely the same experience as that through which Tess has gone: 'in London he was carried off his head and nearly entrapped by a woman much older than himself, though luckily he escaped not greatly the worse for the experience'. In describing it to Tess later on he tells how he had 'plunged into eight-and-forty hours' dissipation with a stranger'. And Tess exclaims, 'tis just the same'. But Clare never sees this.

I wonder if that 'deposit' ought not to have been called 'illogical'.

"All this is in the future. Clare's attention is soon drawn to Tess, but he of course has no recollection of having seen her before, though she remembers him at once. From Clare and from others, during this period we get constant reference, dramatically ironic, to Tess's virginity. 'What a fresh and virginal daughter of Nature that milkmaid is!' If these references are merely ironic they are very crude and tasteless. But it is highly probable that they are full of meaning—of Hardy's view of Tess as still essentially maiden and pure. Helped by a June evening, they draw near to each other. Each is attractively puzzled by the other. Tess becomes very happy indeed, for she has been transplanted from the scene of her grief' life is strong within her, and she is in the early stages of love, when it is exciting but not disturbing. Clare is as yet only interested, but their work with cows in the summer dawns leads him further in, for at these times Tess looks to him like 'a visionary essence of woman', with a strange and ethereal beauty. It is strange, perhaps fateful, that he should have seen her under this aspect in these first impressionable days, for Hardy does as a matter of fact, lay great stress throughout this time on the opposite quality in Tess. At one time—'there was nothing ethereal about her face; all was real vitality, real warmth, real incarnation.' At another, when she was flushed with sleep—'the brimfulness of her nature breathed from her.' So that when at last he clasps her in his arms it is as 'the desire of his eyes'.

"All this time, side by side with the main theme, there has been developed the second subject of the loves of the other three milkmaids—Izz, Retty and Marian—for Clare. It is beautifully, pathetically done, and includes in its course the exquisite idyll of Clare's carrying of all four girls, in their Sunday muslins, one by one across the flooded road. The three girls and their feelings, at this and other moments, are subtly differentiated. Their love for Clare is almost as real, quite as intense, as Tess's. Apart from verisimilitude, why did Hardy introduce this second subject? Was it to make Tess's love less exceptional, and therefore less important?—one of a bed of flowers drawn up by the sun? But there was that premonitory meeting four years ago.



"And all the time, too, the landscape background is being painted in : an unrolling picture of the life of the farm so rich and fascinating as to divide the interest of so absorbing a human story.

"The fourth phase shows us, during that long, hot summer, Clare's love intensifying and Tess steadily refusing to agree to any sort of binding or engagement. We get more knowledge about Clare, and find him intellectually admirable. We see more of his family, especially of his father—a good, enthusiastic, intolerant person. Suddenly a half-forgotten line of story comes swinging in to converge upon the new one : we hear that Alec D'Urberville has met old Mr. Clare and, having first quarrelled with him, has been converted to a new way of life. The new and apparently irrelevant fact lies waiting till the time comes for its effect to be felt. Tess's holding out against Clare's importunity is kept up almost to the point of incredibility, but at last she consents to be 'his for ever and ever'. Five times she has tried to tell him of the obstacle, and five times has been driven to a subterfuge. Having at last said yes, she breaks into a 'dry hard sobbing', but in the days that follow she 'lived in spiritual attitudes more nearly approaching ecstasy than any other period of her life.' We remember Hardy said that her early days at Talbothays were the 'happiest' in her life, and observe the careful distinction of the two states of mind. As they wander about, enjoying the new freedom and openness of their love, Hardy continually points over their shoulder at the waiting shadows : sometimes the air is tense with terror, as in some old Norse saga of doom. The omens thicken, but the quiet wedding takes place ; still they continue—the legendary death—foreboding coach, the crowing cock, the fearsome D'Urberville portraits, and finally the news of Retty Priddle's attempt to kill herself. This last blow turns the scale for Tess : she will tell Clare there and then. Had he not, even before his marriage vows, sworn that he would never hurt or neglect her.

"And so we came to the most lacerating scene in all Hardy. There is tragedy as dark, sorrows as great, in *Jude*, but it happens to people who have chosen their own way, offered themselves to the torment, understood the nature of

their punishment. But this is different—how—different need not be laboured. The scene is one of the 'inevitable' ones of Hardy. The 'hard logical deposit' explains, but it does not excuse, Clare's behaviour. What is unforgivable in it is his refusal to make any allowance for her on account of his own similar 'fall' (he has told his story easily, asked forgiveness coolly, and receiving it, has dismissed the business lightly), but one has to remember the Victorian formulas—one for men and one for women—on the subject. The relation of Clare and Tess, that night and the next day, is imagined absolutely. Clare's mental workings are not admirable. He shifts his ground in an odd way for one so 'logical.' At different times he objects (a) that Tess is not 'pure, innocent,' (b) that she is another man's wife by nature, (c) that it would be bad for his children if their mother were known to have been reduced before her marriage. These last two cruel irrelevances merely confuse the issue. Yet the astonishing sleep-walking incident shows that some sort of love has got a hold on his heart. If he could have remembered that 'great thoughts come from the heart' !

"Tess goes home to the philosophic Joan and her most un-philosophic husband, and Clare leaves England. Before departing he visits his father's house. The choosing of King Samuel's words in praise of a virtuous woman as the reading for the evening is as natural as it is ironic ; but the irony is distinctly overdone, and probability lacking, when Mrs. Clare concludes her sequent homily with the words, "Well, I wish I could have seen her, Angel. Since she is pure and chaste she would have been refined enough for me'. Excellent, however, is her perception of her son's agitation, and her quiet visit and question to him : 'Angel—is she a young woman whose history will bear investigation ?'

" 'She is spotless !' he replied ; and felt that if it had sent him to eternal hell there and then he would have told that lie. And one comments : True ; but why ? For whose sake is the lie told ? for Tess's, or his own ? Tess cannot stay at home, and wanders from place to place 'with some of the habitude of the wild animal.' A pretty piece of satire on 'sport'—the dying birds in the wood after the shooting-party—gives her another opportunity to show her lovely brave soul. She chooses to work under a slave-driving master, preferring tyranny to



gallantry. At last, in despair at not hearing from Clare, and ground down by poverty and drudgery, she decides to go and see Clare's parents. Her fifteen-mile walk is finely described, but ill-luck dogs her still, symbolised by the piece of blood-stained butcher's paper which beats up and down by the gate as she rings vainly at the vicars' bell. For she misses the vicar, misses Clare's mother, and 'contacts' instead his egregious brothers and Mercy Chant, Clare's otherwise intended. Hardy calls this 'the greatest misfortune of her life': it certainly robbed her of her chance to wipe out all the others, and led directly to the culminating one of all. For plodding desperately back to her toil, she meets the converted Alec D'Urberville again.

"The white-hot glow of inspired narration that has made us like the story with Hardy cools off a little now, and one has some slight difficulty in believing in Alec D'Urberville: his enthusiasm at learning of the baby that was born and died, is unconvincing, his amazingly villainous 'morally you belong to me' more so. An extraordinary thing is Tess's handing on of sceptical arguments learnt from Clare, not understood by herself, but producing the unintended effect of undermining D'Urberville's new and shallow-rooted beliefs. Once again it is soul-destroying weariness that bends Tess a little to acknowledge kindness in D'Urberville's offers of help, and realising the danger of the feeling going further she writes an infinitely pitiful letter to Clare. Clare, in the large climate of Brazil has already realised how much of purely insular convention has underlain his shocked feelings, and about this time his morality is thoroughly cleaned up by a clear-headed stranger (who dies as soon as he has done his beneficent work). Nobly enduring all things, Tess now has to go the assistance of her parents, and the misery of the eviction of the family stirs a bitter sense of Clare's unjust cruelty. At the same time D'Urberville's kindness grows more urgent, and what with one thing and another Tess is brought to entertain the idea that 'in a true sense this man alone was her true husband'.

"And so comes the 'fulfilment'. Clare returns to England, but though he has had Tess's two letters and another wonderfully concocted by Izz and Marian, he still hesitates as to where truth, decency and love should take him: by the time he has

decided to seek Tess it is too late, and he finds her as D'Urberville's mistress. This term is a shocking one to apply to our sweet Tess, but in the paragraph describing her as she appears before Clare, Hardy deliberately depicts her as now for the first time smirched: and this is the book's tragedy.

Tess appeared on the threshold—not at all as he had expected to see her—bewilderingly otherwise, indeed. Her great natural beauty was, if not heightened, rendered more obvious by her attire. She was loosely wrapped in a cashmere dressing-gown of grey-white, embroidered in half-mourning tints, and she wore slippers of the same hue. Her neck rose out of a frill of down, and her well-remembered cable of dark-brown hair was partially coiled up in a mass at the back of her head and partly hanging on her shoulder—the evident result of haste.

Her killing of D'Urberville at least wipes out *this* stain, and we are relieved to find that Clare does not shrink from her when he hears what she has done. He ponders stupidly on 'the extinction of her moral sense', but he embraces her, says he loves her, and Tess is content.

"Something like happiness, a ghost of happiness, begins for them as they roam about the country-side. Tess's simple soul has entered into Clare, and he says, 'when they have forgotten us we can make for some port'. They wander into the New Forest, and find lodging in a vacant furnished mansion. This part of the story, brief as it is, is like the fairy tale their whole life should have been. Some novelists would have let them get there!—but Hardy must be true to life, and gives us a marvellous picture of the coming of dawn on Stonehenge and the quiet arrest. Here again, a lesser writer would have stopped. But Hardy, in a very short chapter of purest art, brings his story to its dreadful end, and puts the pinnacle on the massive structure of his indictment of society. "Justice" was done, he says. And leaves us with that strange picture of Clare and 'Liza—Lu—bent, weeping, praying—creeping on hand in hand: 'Liza—Lu, a spiritualised image of Tess."

### 3. The Character of Tess.

Referring to the character of Tess, Duffin has observed: "Among Hardy's women Tess Durbeyfield claims attention first, not only by reason of popularity, but more especially in that her creator distinguished her by the appellation of 'a pure



woman'. In a late preface (that to the Wessex edition), when some of the resulting foam and fury had down down, Hardy disclosed that he had appended the sub-title after reading the proofs of the novel, and had supposed it would be received without dispute. He now thought it would have been better not to put it—a regret that would never have occurred to Bernard Shaw, with his belief in the salutary nature of 'shocks'. Doubtless to the guardians of public morality in the 'nineties it must have appeared intolerable that to the injury of making a girl like Tess the heroine of a novel there should have been added the insult of calling her 'a pure woman'. Hardy had already taken the opportunity of a new edition to remind his critics that the very narrow and special meaning they were accustomed to attach to the word 'pure' was 'an artificial and derivative' one, resulting from 'the ordinances of civilisation'. He might have quoted the epigrammist who said that woman's virtue was man's greatest invention. Instead he reminded his readers that the controversial word had an aesthetic a usage. This is a highly interesting suggestion. We speak of a pure art, pure comedy. Let us adopt the suggestion and apply the word 'pure' in this sense to Tess: unbroken, unspoilt, unadulterated, unflawed, perfect! This is very satisfying indeed; but we must remember that in the text of the novel another word is used—'standard': 'an almost standard woman', Hardy calls Tess. Now, 'standard' means model, of a quality to be aimed at, by comparison with which inferior examples are tested and rejected. This is again an acceptable description of Tess, and confirms the meaning we have given to the word 'pure'. But Hardy's modification of the epithet 'standard' must not be overlooked: '*almost* standard' is the expression. And he goes on to define the modification. What the modification was we shall see in a moment, but it had nothing to do with purity in the narrow moral sense. In that sense she was not almost but absolutely pure. Purity is of the spirit, and with a spiritual (that is, non-physical) reference, the word 'pure' may be unconditionally applied to her in the moral sense that the Puritans baulked at. Whether morality be of the mind, or of the heart, or of both, there cannot be two respectable opinions about Tess's morals. She is as moral as any prude. Her behaviour, her thoughts, her desires, on all perilous occasions—with D'Urberville, early and late, with Clare, with her other admirers—are unimpeach-

able, considered from the most critical code and point of view. Moreover, her shame and remorse are infinite. She has a conscience that is quite amazing in view of the probability that conscience is almost entirely a matter of what one has been taught in very early childhood. Mentally and morally she is stainless, with strong intent to keep so, and probably continues so from the first to last; even during the later period of dissipation with D'Urberville her mind is drugged and dead with weariness, pain and despair; and so guiltless.

"But it is man's privilege and problem to have a body as well as mind, and in Tess the flesh was slightly at variance with her spirit. Early in the novel we read:

She had an attribute which... caused D'Urberville's eyes to rivet themselves upon her. It was a luxuriousness of aspect, a fulness of growth, which made her appear more of a woman than she really was. She had inherited the feature from her mother without the quality it denoted.

Here Hardy clearly suggests an element in the flesh antagonistic to the mental purity emphasised above. He indeed denies the presence of a quality suggested. But this denial refers to the mental constitution. In several places Hardy emphasises the splendid animal nature of Tess. For instance:

How very lovable her face was to him. Yet there was nothing ethereal about it, all was vitality, real warmth, real incarnation. And it was in her mouth that this culminated.

Or again:

Her face was flushed with sleep and her eye lids hung heavy over their pupils. The brimfulness of her nature breathed from her.

Tess's sister, hand in hand with when Clare makes his exit from the story, is described as 'a spiritualised image of Tess, slighter than she...' And the line of characterisation thus etched in is continued by Hardy with exquisite delicacy throughout the picture. Tess was, in her body, the daughter of her mother. What praise and wonder are sufficient for the purity of her soul that could keep her spotless, save for the momentary admission of D'Urberville's advances, for which we have already found ample explanations.

"Returning now to the '*almost*' with which Hardy modified his description of Tess as a 'standard woman', we find in it a final explanation of her 'fall'. Hardy leaves us in no doubt as to what he means by his '*almost*', for he adds—'but for the



slight incautiousness of character inherited from her race.' That is to say her mind had the touch of yieldingness that was just necessary to allow the touch of animalism in her flesh to respond to great external pressure.

"Hardy's conception of Tess hangs thus on the two words we have been discussing. But this is to consider her in the abstract, as the embodiment of an idea—a thing which is plainly ridiculous. Tess lives in all her breathing beauty, with the touch of the imperfect upon the would-be-perfect—as Clare perceived—that gave sweetness because it was that which gave humanity. Legend has it that Hardy drew Tess from a glimpse he got of a girl driving a cart in the best country, and certainly the picture has the warm reality of life—her long heavy clinging tresses of long brown hair; her deep dark eyes—Hardy loses himself in those 'large tender eyes, neither black nor blue nor grey nor violet; rather all those shades together, and a hundred others, which could be seen if one looked into their irises—shade behind shade—tint beyond tint—around pupils that had no bottom.' Her grace and vitality constantly call up the likeness of a wild creature: 'there was something of the habitude of the wild animal in the unreflecting instinct with which wandered on from place to place' in those hard days of Clare's desertion. As she slept on the stone on the Great Plain, 'her breathing now was quick and smell, like that of a lesser creature than a woman'. When accosted by a man on the road her way of escape is to run like the wind and hurry herself deep among the trees. The life within her is irrepressible—'she little recked the strength of her own vitality.'

"But her mental characteristics are no less rare and delightful. She is high-strung, impressionable and poetic; her soul soars into space when she gazes at the night heavens; in the stress of her emotions at the sound of Clare's harp the whole of the twilight garden grows instinct with harmony and passion; and at his touch her accelerated pulse drives the blood flushing to her finger ends. She is heroic, for we hear of 'her many months of lovely self-chastisement wrestling, communings, schemes to lead a future of austere isolation'; and her long endurance of retributive agonies is sublime. And she shows perfect nobility and generosity of sentiment, in her attitude towards her simple rivals at the farm and her splendid faith

in Clare, which amounts indeed to a quite ineffable humility. Her knowledge that she has never wronged Clare or any human being awakes in her, just once, a passionate sense of cruel injustice. And as she tells Clare her story in the firelight, even more as she gets up from her bed of stone and goes forward to the men who have come to arrest her, saying quietly, 'I am ready', one feels that she deserves that rarest of all the terms that can be applied to man or woman—'great'.

"Whatever else we call her, Tess remains the most lovable of all Hardy's heroines. All women adore her, and some men. What she might have made of life, what life might have made of her, had circumstances and Clare been kind, is beyond dreaming."

#### 4. THE CHARACTER OF ANGEL CLARE

Angel Clare is one of the intellectual characters of Hardy. Referring to this Duffin has observed: "With Angel Clare we are back to intellect, with all its limitations. An amazing proof of this is his practice of putting before Tess merciless arguments from the repertoire of scepticism, arguments which not only destroy Tess's simple faith, but ricochet off to bring down Alec D'Urberville and himself. His failure of Tess at the crisis of her life is due to the same absence of all generous warmth of spirit; his experiment on Izz Huett shows the temperament of the vivisector. Another instance of his cold, unemotional habit of mind is seen when he returns to England. His eyes have been opened to his folly; he has already had one letter, full of infinitely pathetic love and appeal, from Tess; now he finds a second, equally pathetic in approach. He is 'much disturbed', but he has time and freedom of mind to give his parents a mobbish little lecture on the aristocratic origin of the Durbeyfield family, and he actually delays for more than a week before setting out in search of Tess. In explanation of his behaviour at the crisis of the story Hardy suggests that 'with more animalism he might have been a nobler man.' It is not animalism but imagination that Clare lacks. Nor indeed is he free from the charge of animalism, to judge by an odd incident that occurs before Tess and he are betrothed. It is early morning at the farm, and Tess has knocked at Clare's door to awaken him and has then returned



to her room to dress. When a few minutes later, he meets her on the landing, he says, peremptorily, 'Now, Miss Flirt, before you go down. It is a fortnight since I spoke and this won't do any longer. You *must* tell me what you mean, or I shall have to leave this house. My door was ajar just now, and I saw you. For your own safety I must go. You don't know.' This would seem to show Clare little better than a better-bred Alec D'Urberville. Even apart from this it is not clear that he merits Hardy's own description of him as 'spiritual'. His fastidiousness and emotional self-control (which latter quality he shares with most of the heroes of the novels) can be sufficiently explained by his reasoned way of life and his upbringing at the hands of those excellent people, the Vicar and his wife. Conscience is very much a matter of early training.

"Nevertheless, Clare is no creature of abstractions. His mind is full of a rich pagan life. Gather his family, Mercy Chant among them, and put the fallen Angel in the midst, and it becomes apparent how much nearer to the living truth he is than they; he has discarded their doctrines, but his religion is life. Yet he has not swallowed quite all the formulas. Sad for Tess that the one fragment of the early teaching that has been too strong for him has been that concerning a woman's virtue."

## 5. THE THEME OF TESS

In the writing of *Tess*, Hardy had a definite theme. Referring to this Weber has written in *Hardy of Wessex*: "In *Tess* Hardy put more of his heart than he put into anything else that he ever wrote. In a sense, Hardy had been getting ready all his life for writing the history of the unhappy milkmaid. The novel was the natural and logical outcome of everything that had gone before."

"Thomas Hardy's father was the owner of a farm known as Talbothays. It was situated in the dairy country of the From Valley and within easy walking distance of Max Gate. Hardy liked to visit this neighbourhood and often invited friends or visitors at his house to walk with him. One of these friends, Mr. Charles T. Hankinston, recalls taking such a walk along the From and coming to a farm near Moreton,

beyond Talbothays, which caught Hardy's eyes. The despair into which some of the farm buildings had been allowed to fall led him to stop and, while leaning over the rickety gate, to discourse on the hard life of the farm worker. Hardy had written an article back in 1883 on 'The Dorsetshire Labourer'. He there told about one family which had recently come under his notice: 'The father and eldest son were paid eleven shillings a week each, the younger son ten shillings, three nearly grown-up daughters four shillings a week each, and the mother the same when she chose to go out.' He remembered a shepherd boy who had actually starved to death, back in the days before Hardy had begun to attend school. Hardy's own economic position at this time was 'one that afforded much to be thankful for,' as he had said of Elizabeth Jane, but it did not blind him 'to the fact that there were others receiving less who had deserved much more.' There were others—even in combe, on the opposite side of Dorchester from Talbothays. Here, where the Hardys had formerly owned a good deal of property, there were more rickety gates and dilapidated buildings to remind him of the decline and fall of the Hardys. He recalled having had a distant relative pointed out to him, the father of 'an enormous lot of children,' who represented what was once the leading branch of the Hardy family. Not only fences and buildings went to pieces, men did too—and women. So we go down, down, down, he thought, as he returned to Max Gate.

"In any Dorset family with 'an enormous lot of children', want and sickness were certainties under the conditions which Hardy saw existing all around him. It was no new problem. T. R. Malthus had written about it in 1798 in his *Essay on the Principle of Population*, and a sixth edition of this work had recently emphasised the difficulties attendant upon large families. Poverty was painful enough when there was only a single person like Marty South involved. But suppose that heroic soul had had to look after not only her sick father, John Smith but a dozen younger brothers and sisters as well. It took no 'wisest, wizard' to guess at the inevitable deterioration. In *The Woodlanders* Hardy had written of 'dangling and etiolated arms of ivy groping in vain for some support,



their leaves being dwarfed and sickly for want of sunlight'; and that in this respect they 'show them to men akin' he had recorded in his poem 'In a Wood.' Large families were certain to produce weak bodies, sickly characters, dwarfed personalities. Let some unscrupulous Fitzpiers enter the situation, and one of society's oldest calamities were certain to be re-enacted.

"As for the Wessex Novels, the whole truth about seduction had not yet been told. Hardy remembered how the *Spectator* had ridiculed him for supposing (in *Desperate Remedies*) that 'an unmarried lady owning an estate could have an illegitimate child!' He remembered how (at the very moment that Tolstoy was working with complete freedom upon his great *Anna Karenina*). Leslie Stephen had insisted on Hardy's handling the account of Fanny's seduction in *Far From the Madding Crowd* in a gingerly fashion. Hence the whispered confidences of Liddy and Bathsheba. Perhaps the time had come when the author need no longer whisper. A number of things had happened since *Far From the Madding Crowd* appeared in 1874. Trollope, for instance, had again brought forward the problem of seduction in his *Autobiography* and from the preface to one of his novels had quoted these words:

I have introduced in the *Vicar of Bullhampton* the character of a girl whom I will call—for want of a truer word that shall not in its truth be offensive—a castaway. I have endeavoured to endow her with qualities that may create sympathy. It is not long since that the very existence of such a condition of life as was hers, was supposed to be unknown to our sisters and daughters.

Trollope explained that his novel was written with the object of exciting not only pity but also sympathy for the unfortunate woman, and then he added: 'I could not venture to make this female the heroine of my story.'

"To have made her a heroine would have been to anticipate *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*." There was another and more powerful reason for thinking that the time had come when an author might write more fearlessly on this theme. Through *A Doll's House* (1879) and *Ghosts* (1881) and other plays Ibsen's influence was beginning to be felt on English thought. An article on Ibsen appeared in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1890, in which he was criticized for using the drama for edification. Hardy read the article and disagreed with the point of view

expressed. While he believed that Ibsen's edifying was too obvious, he was far from wishing to exclude all didactic aims from the writer's purpose. Only, Hardy believed the edification of reader or spectator ought to be accomplished in a less obvious way. As one within whose own lifetime that best of all sermons, Dickens's *Christmas Carol*, had been preached, Hardy never made the mistake of Edgar Allan Poe in thinking that art and morals should never join hands. He was therefore quite ready to welcome Trollope's announcement of theme on which the Victorian world was greatly in need of edification, and Ibsen's example served as a challenge to the English author to speak out. Shaw's *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* appeared in 1891. Two years earlier Hardy himself had written an article on 'Candour in English Fiction' in which he lamented 'that the great bulk of English fiction of the present day is characterised by its lack of sincerity' and urged the great desirability of permitting novels to treat frankly 'the position of man and woman in nature and the position of belief in the minds of man and woman—things which everybody is thinking but nobody is saying.' Open eyes and a sympathetic heart were all that were needed to settle for Hardy the theme of *Tess*. It was to be the story of a seduced girl making a futile but heroic effort to help her worthless family in 'a blighted world, where families go down, down, down.'

"Stories of seduction were no new things in nineteenth-century England. Trollope's *Vicar of Bullhampton* has already been mentioned. George Eliot's *Adam Bede*, Dickens's *David Copperfield*, and Scott's *Heart of Midlothian* all dealt with the old theme. But in all these stories the unfortunate victim was a weakling and set in contrast with the heroine, who kept the centre of the stage. Scott's Effie, Dickens's little Emily, and George Eliot's Hetty are all overshadowed by their stronger sisters. Hardy's originality lies in advancing the victim to the position of heroine. In *The Woodlanders* he had spoken of the Sophoclean drama sometimes to be found even in the rural Dorset, and he now proposed to write his *Electra*. In July, 1889, he was reading Sophocles's *Oedipus Tyrannus* and meditating on the essence of tragedy in literary art. Obviously none of the earlier English novels mentioned above could help



him in the inventions of a tragic plot on the chosen theme ; and critics who attempt to trace relationships here are certain to waste their time.

"A more rewarding comparison might be made between *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and Charles Lamb's almost forgotten *Rosamund Gray*. Lamb's hero was 'young Allan Clare.' Is it mere accident that Hardy's young man bears almost the same name, Angel Clare ?.....Lamb's statement that the elder Clare had been 'at times betrayed into scepticism' parallels words that Hardy, like many another young man in those Darwinian days, might have written of himself. Angel Clare is Allan Clare brought up-to-date. Lamb's story is a slight and undeveloped piece of work, but the many resemblances to *Tess* in incident and characterisation are suggestive.

"Hardy's Clare might very well have been the author of a letter that Havelock Ellis wrote in 1878 : 'I had once some idea of entering the Church, but I begin to see now that I must definitely abandon that idea. I find my views, irreconcilable with a position in the Church.' The more Hardy himself meditated on the views of the Church, the more he was impressed by the fact that ecclesiastical dogma seemed in complete disagreement with the laws of nature which he had been observing for nearly fifty years. He concluded that an act which might be socially a great tragedy could be in nature not at all alarming. From these meditations emerged the plot of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. After the heroine's seduction she would marry a young man whose religious views were unsettled. After he had deserted her she would be forced by poverty and want into the arms of her seducer. If, in a moment of despair—well, what would a betrayed girl do in a moment of despair.

"For an answer to this question Hardy did not have to go back to the story of Clytemnestra in the Greek play he had just been reading. A suggestion was available near at hand. When as a boy he had daily tramped to school in Dorchester, he had to pass an inn kept by a man named Brown. Mrs. Brown was a kindly soul who used to give passing schoolboys cakes and apples. One day a former lover appeared and told Brown about his wife's past. In despair Martha Brown killed the man and was hanged in public. Young Tom Hardy was

present at the execution, and he never forgot the sight. Sixty years later he referred to it, in one of the few public speeches he ever made, on November 16, 1910, when he was presented the Freedom of the Borough of Dorchester. In the tragic end of Martha Brown, Hardy found complete assurance as to what his young heroine would do under somewhat similar conditions. The novelist thus found himself face to face with a situation that had never before arisen in writing any of the Wessex Novels. It occurred to him that perhaps it ought not to be allowed to arise here. He thought carefully and long over the concluding events of the story. As if to anticipate the objections of those who were later to accuse him of loading the dice against Tess, he even made a special trip to Winchester and there walked moodily up and down outside the jail, asking himself what other logical conclusion there was for the situation as it had developed in his mind. He saw no way but one. 'It had to be,' he said sadly, and in after years he repeated his conviction : 'It had to be. There was no other end possible'."

Referring to the theme of *Tess* Kettle has observed in *An Introduction to the English Novel* : "The subject of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is stated clearly by Hardy to be the fate of a 'pure woman'; in fact it is the destruction of the English peasantry. More than any other nineteenth-century novel it has the quality of a social document. It has even, for all its high-pitched emotional quality, the kind of impersonality that the expression suggests. Its subject is all-pervasive, affecting and determining the nature of every part. It is a novel with a thesis and the thesis is true.

"The thesis is that in the course of the nineteenth century the disintegration of the peasantry—a process which had its roots deep in the past—had reached its final and tragic stage. With the extension of capital farming (farming, that is to say, in which the landowners farm not for sustenance but for profit and in which the land-workers become wage-earners) the old yeoman class of small-holders or peasants, with their traditions of independence and their own native culture, was bound to disappear. The developing sources of history were too strong for them and their way of life. And because that way of life had been proud and deep-rooted its destruction was necessarily



painful and tragic. *Tess* is the story and the symbol of the destruction.

"Tess Durbeyfield is a peasant girl. Her parents belong to a class ranking above the farm-labourers, a class 'including the carpenter, the smith, the shoemaker, the huckster, together with nondescript workers other than farm-labourers; a set of people who claimed a certain stability of aim and conduct to the fact of their being life-holders, like Tess's father, or copy-holders, or occasionally, small freeholders.' Already by the opening of the novel the Durbeyfields have fallen on hard times, a plight by no means solely due to the lack of stability in the characters of John and Joan. A further twist is given to their difficulty in making ends meet by the accident in which their horse is killed. It is her sense of guilt over this accident that allows Tess to be persuaded by her mother into visiting Tantridge D'Urbervilles to 'claim kin' with a more prosperous branch of the family. And from this visit (itself an attempt to solve the Durbeyfields' economic problems) the whole tragedy derives.

"In these opening chapters of the novel there is an immediate and insistent emphasis on historical processes, so that from the start the characters are not merely as individuals. The discovery by John Durbeyfield of his ancestry is not just an introductory comic scene, a display of quaint 'character'. It states the basic theme of the novel—what the Durbeyfields have been and what they become. The landscape in the second chapter (it is far more effective description than the famous set-piece at the beginning of *The Return of the Native*) is described and given significance almost wholly in terms of history. The 'club-walking' scene, again, is contrasted with the May Day dances of the past and early pagan rites are recalled. Tess is revealed as one of the group, typical (not handsomer than others), and in the comparison between her and her mother the differences brought about by historical changes are emphasised. John Durbeyfield lives in the peasant folk-lore of the past. Tess has been to a national school. 'When they were together the Jacobean and Victorian ages were juxtaposed.'

"The sacrifice of Tess to D'Urberville is symbolic of the historical process at work. D'Urberville is not, of course, a D'Urberville at all, but the son of the newly rich Stoke family,

capitalists who have bought their way into the gentry, and Tess's cry when she sees D'Urberville estate: 'I thought we were an old family; but this is all new!' carries a world of irony. Tess herself does not want to go to D'Urberville's and when she does finally agree to go she dresses in her working clothes. But her mother insists on her dressing up for the occasion.

'Very well, I suppose you know,' replied Tess with calm abandonment.

And to please her parent the girl put herself quite in Joan's hands, saying serenely, 'Do what you like with me, Mother.'

Again the moment is symbolic. Tess, prepared to become, since change she must, a worker, is handed over by her mother to the life and the mercies of the ruling class.

"From the moment of her seduction by D'Urberville, Tess's story becomes a hopeless struggle, against overwhelming odds, to maintain her self-respect. After the death of her child she becomes a wage-labourer at the dairy-farm at Talbothays. The social degradation is mitigated by the kindness of the dairyman and his wife, but the work is only seasonal. Here however she meets and falls in love with Angel Clare and through marriage to him thinks to escape her fate. But Angel, the intellectual, turns out to be more cruel than D'Urberville, the sensualist. Angel, with all his emancipated ideas, is not merely a prig and a hypocrite but a snob as well. He understands nothing of the meaning of the decline of the D'Urbervilles and his attitude to Tess is one of self-righteous idealisation.

'My position—is this,' he said abruptly. 'I thought—any man would have thought—that by giving up all ambition to win a wife with social standing, with fortune, with knowledge of the world, I should secure rustic innocence as surely as I should secure pink checks.'

And when his dream of rustic innocence is shattered he can only taunt Tess with:

'Don't, Tess; don't argue. Different societies, different manners. You almost make me say you are an unapprehending peasant woman, who has never been initiated into the proportions of social things.'

"Even at the moment of her deepest humiliation Tess is stung to the retort:

'Lots of families are as bad as mine in that! Retsey's family were once large landowners, and so were Dairyman Billet's. And the



Debbyhouses, who now are carters, were once the De Bayeux family. You find such as I everywhere; 'tis feature of the country, and I can't help it.'

"It is important to give these passages their full weight because they emphasise the kind of novel this is. Such passages, read as 'psychological drama,' ring queer and unconvincing. Their function in the novel is to stress the social nature of Tess's destiny and its typicality.

"After Angel has left her the social degradation of Tess continues. At the farm at Flintcomb Ash she and the other girls (once again it is significant that Tess's fate is shared by Marion and Izz who have not, in the same way, 'sinned' morally) become fully proletarianized, working for wages in the hardest, most degrading conditions. The scene at the threshing is here particularly important, a symbol of the dehumanized relationships of the new capitalist farms. At Talbothays there had at least been some possibility of pride and interest in the labour as well as a certain kindliness in the common kitchen at which the dairyman's wife presided. Here there is nothing kind or satisfying and the emphasis on Marion's bottle is not casual, not just a matter of the individual 'character'.

"The final blow to Tess's attempts to maintain herself comes with the death of her father and the consequent expulsion of the Durbeyfields from their cottage. John Durbeyfield had been a life-holder.

But as the long holdings fell in they were seldom again let to similar tenants, and were mostly pulled down, if not absolutely required by the farmer for his hands. Cottagers who were not directly employed on the land were looked down upon with disfavour, and the banishment of some starved the trade of others, who were thus obliged to follow. These families who had formed the backbone of the village life in the past, who were the depositories of the village traditions, had to seek refuge in the large centres; the process, humorously designated by statisticians as the 'tendency of the rural population towards the large towns,' being really the tendency of water to flow uphill when forced by machinery.

"It is the need to support her family, thus driven off the land, that finally forces Tess back to Alec D'Urberville. And when Angel, chastened and penitent, returns, the final sacrifice is inevitable. Tess kills D'Urberville. The policemen take

her from the altar at Stonehenge and the black flag is run upon Winchester Jail."

## 6. DEFECTS IN TESS

Some critics are of the opinion that though *Tess* is Hardy's greatest work, as a work of art it is a failure. Kettle has observed in *An Introduction to the English Novel*: "It is important for a number of reasons to emphasise that *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is a moral fable, that it is the expression of a generalised human situation in history and neither (what it is generally assumed to be) a purely personal tragedy nor (what Hardy appears to have intended) a philosophic comment on life in general and the fate of woman in particular. If we read the novel as a personal tragedy, the individual history of Tess Durbeyfield, a great deal strikes us as extremely unsatisfactory.

"In the first place there is Hardy's floating of normal probability in his insistence on a series of the most unlucky chances. In *Tess* the most notable of these chances are the episode in which Tess's written confession, pushed under Angel's door, goes under the carpet and the moment when Tess, having walked from Flintcomb Ash to Emminster, overhears Angel's brothers talking about her, she has not the heart to visit her parents-in-law. If either of these chance happenings had not occurred, all might easily have been saved. Again, in the broader realm of probability, is there any adequate reason why Tess, at the end, should murder D'Urberville? True, she does not know the full extent of Angel's forgiveness, but at least she knows that he has basically changed. It is not perhaps any one of these manifestations of tragic improbability that we are likely to jib at, but rather the combination of them. J. I. M. Stewart, in an interesting essay, has stated the problem.

Always in Hardy it is certain that the incident of fatality within the general operation of chance will be higher than we are commonly prepared to accept of its being in nature. Why does he thus so often seem to play against his characters with loaded dice; why does he darken the sky with his arrows when Elfrida Swancourt and her many successors are fighting for life? The universe of his novels is one of a determinism slightly modified to meet the needs of tragedy, the individual will being conceived as having its measure of freedom during certain moments of equilibrium in the universal will, within which it is comprised (the image is Hardy's). It is thus



still a *neutral* universe. Why then does the screw turn so frequently and disastrously as it does?

"Now if we read the novel as a detailed particularized study of an individual life it is clear that this turning of the screw does constitute a serious weakness. What it amounts to in *Tess* is that we must regard the characters—Tess herself in particular—as having less than normal luck and—more important—less than normal human resilience in the situation in which they find themselves. Is not Tess, after all (admitting her superiority of sensitiveness) a good deal less shrewd and worldly-wise than a peasant girl of her age might naturally be assumed to be? Is not her very sensitiveness a little false? (Could she, for instance, have *afforded*—bearing in mind the conditions of Flintcomb Ash—to be merely hurt and unprotesting when Angel's brothers take away her boots when they find them in the ditch?) Such considerations are, if the novel is a realistic psychological study, entirely relevant. But they seem to me, in fact, no more relevant than the criticism which says of *King Lear* that Lear's conduct in the first act is unlikely or that the Gloucester sub-plot is ill-planned because the existence of two such cases of filial impiety within so small a circumference is improbable. *Tess* is not a novel of the kind of *Emma* or *Middlemarch*. It does not illuminate within a detailed framework particular problems of human conduct and feeling. Its sphere is the more generalised movement of human destiny.

"Once we recognise that the subject of *Tess* is the destruction of the peasantry many of the more casual criticisms of the book are seen to be rather wide of the mark.

"There is the question, for instance, of Alec D'Urberville. Many readers are antagonised by his presentation as what amounts to the stock villain of Victorian melodrama, the florid, moustache-twirling bouncer who refers to the heroine (whom he is about to seduce) as 'Well, my Beauty...'. Is this not a character who has stepped direct out of the tenth-rate theatre or 'she was poor but she was honest'? It seems to me that almost the whole point about D'Urberville is that he is indeed the archetypal Victorian villain. Far from being weakened by the associations of crude melodrama he in fact illuminates the whole type and we understand better

why the character of which he is a symbol did dominate a certain grade of Victorian entertainment and was enthusiastically hissed by the audience. It is the very typicality of D'Urberville that serves the purpose of the novel.

"The treatment of Christianity in the book has a similar relevance. The conversion of D'Urberville is not in itself necessary to the plot of the novel (his rediscovery of Tess could easily have been contrived some other way). Hardy's object here is clearly to heighten the association, implicit throughout the book, of the Christian faith and Tess's downfall. The man with the paint-pot who regales Tess with the assurance that *THY DAMNATION SLUMBERETH NOT* at the moment of her betrayal turns up again with converted D'Urberville. Is the comment fair to Christianity? The question is not relevant. Hardy is not attempting an estimate of the total validity of the Christian philosophy. His subject is the destruction of the peasant Tess. It is the place of religious influence in that destruction that is the concern. And in the pattern of the novel the Christian church is seen as at best a neutral observer, at worst an active abettor in the process of destruction. It is not, historically considered, an unreasonable comment.

"At best a natural observer, at worst an active abettor: the phrase applies to a good deal more than Hardy's view of Christianity. One of the aspects of *Tess* that we tend to find peculiarly unconvincing—if not repulsive—is the sense of the 'loaded dice.' It emerges in its least palpable form in passages of the book most obviously intended as fundamental philosophical comment. There is the famous episode, for instance, in which Tess, driving the cart to market, speaks to her little brother of the stars.

'Did you say the stars were worlds, Tess?'

'Yes.'

'All like ours?'

'I don't know; but I think so. They sometimes seem to be like the apples on our stubborn-tree. Most of them splendid and sound—a few blighted.'

'Which do we live on—a splendid one or a blighted one?'

'A blighted one.'

'Tis very unlucky that we didn't pitch on a sound one, when there were so many more of them.'

'Yes.'



'Is it like that really, Tess?' said Abraham, turning to her much impressed, on reconsideration of this rare information.

'How would it have been, if we had pitched on a sound one?'

'Well' Father wouldn't have coughed and crept about as he does, and wouldn't have got too tipsy to go this journey; and Mother wouldn't have been always washing, and never getting finished.'

'And you would have been a rich lady ready-made and not have had to be made rich by marrying a gentleman?'

'O Aby, don't—don't talk of that any more.'

"We tend to reject such an episode on two grounds: in the first place we are not convinced that any peasant girl would talk like that, in the second the philosophy implied (and the whole organisation of the book makes us give it the weight of the author's full sympathy, if not assent) is not calculated to win our support. The world as a blighted apple is an image too facile to satisfy us, even though we may recognise the force of Tess's pessimism. I think it is important, however, to emphasise that even in this passage the pessimism is given a very explicit basis in actual conditions. It is the kind of life her parents lead that drives Tess to her feeling of despair and it is the sentence about her mother never getting finished that in fact saves the scene. For here is no pretentious philosophy of fatality but a bitterly realistic recalling of the actual fate of millions of working women.

"The scene just quoted seems to me to give a most instructive insight into the kind of book *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is. It is not a 'psychological novel'; the presentation of Tess's actual thoughts in this episode is not at all convincing. Nor is it a symbolic statement on the level of *Withering Heights*; Hardy does not penetrate to the profundity of Emily Brontë's understanding of the process of life and when he goes in for philosophical generalisations the result is often embarrassing. And yet this novel, with its queer cramped literary style, and its bogus 'Aeschylean' philosophy, gets hold of something of life and illuminates a phase of human history with an extraordinary compulsion and an insight of oddly moving delicacy.

"What Hardy got hold of was not, I think, quite what his conscious mind believed. In the scene we have just discussed the *intention* (as opposed to the total effect) is to concentrate into the image of the blighted star a whole world of philosophical significance. Hardy took his philosophy of the Immanent

Will very seriously and undoubtedly saw Tess as the victim of 'the President of the Immortals.' A pessimistic and determinist view of the world in which man (and, even more, woman) is at the mercy of the yielding outside Fate is the conscious philosophy behind the novel. The sub-title 'a pure woman' is indicative of the kind of significance. Hardy gave to his story, and there is no doubt that this conscious philosophy affects the book, in general for the worse. It is responsible, for instance, for the 'literary' quality which mars the final sentence. It is responsible for our sense of loaded dice. And it is responsible ultimately for the psychological weakness such as the idealisation of Tess, for the characters are made too often to respond not to life but to Hardy's philosophy. No doubt it is, like Tolstoy's, (an unsatisfactory philosophy and yet also, like Tolstoy's, the views of history expressed in *War and Peace* and *The Dynasts* are worth comparing) it emerges from a passionately honest attempt to grapple with real problems of quite overwhelming difficulty. Hardy at least did have a philosophy (which is more than can be said for most of his contemporaries) and there was more basis to his pessimism—the pessimism of the Wessex peasant who sees his world and his values being destroyed—than can be laughed away with an easy gesture of contempt.

"For the odd thing about this strange and moving novel is that although so much about it has a note of falsity—the manipulation of the plot, the character-study of Tess herself, the inadequate, self-conscious, stilted writing—the total impression is not false at all. Part of the achievement is due undoubtedly to the always effective and often superb evocation of the natural background. This is a special triumph of Hardy's—and one which very few novelists have ever attempted. Such a description as that of the dawn at Talbothays may perhaps best be compared with the description of London in *Oliver Twist*... The atmosphere evoked in such description is not an embellishment to the book, but an integral part of it. We cannot think of Tess and Angel except in the context of such scenes. We believe in Tess because her relationship to her world is so successfully conveyed. When Hardy begins



theorising, discussing in abstract terms Tess's plight, we become uneasy; when he presents her to us in the misty dawn at Talbothays we feel no need to question her authenticity. She is a peasant girl and she is splendid, heroic even, and we know what Hardy means when he talks of 'a pure woman.' The unconvincing moments are these when to make a 'point' Hardy allows his own inadequate *ideas* to weaken his profound *understanding*. Such a moment arises when just before Tess's confession to Angel, he too is made to confess a sexual lapse. Now Hardy can convince us that Angel is a prig and a hypocrite but he simply cannot convince us that the Angel he presents to us in the novel would be quite so morally obtuse as to see no affinity whatever between his confession and hers. He might well convince us that a man only slightly less morally aware would be thus blinded. He might even convince us that Angel himself would be capable of putting a youthful indiscretion into a separate compartment of his mind and there burying it. But to ask us to believe that the Angel we know (and one is not claiming of course any very admirable qualities for him) would within a few minutes of confessing such a lapse of his own respond in quite the way he does to Tess's confession is simply asking us to stretch our credulity beyond its limit. And the reason for it all is obvious. Hardy is determined at all costs to make his point (fair enough in the abstract) about male hypocrisy on this sexual matter. He is determined to get in another blow on behalf of his pure woman. But, because the moral point is uncconvincingly realised in this particular scene between these particular characters, the blow rebounds.

"It is not, of course, a fatal error (there are far graver difficulties in the book) but I quote it to illustrate the battle going on throughout Tess between Hardy's ideas and his understanding. It is the inadequacy of his ideas that gives much of the book its oddly thin and stilted quality and which leads, in particular, to the unsatisfactory manipulation of chance which, more than anything in the novel, arouses our suspicion as to its validity. For the loading of the dice is an admission not so much of cunning as of impotence, a desperate gesture which attempts through artificial stimulation to achieve a consumma-

tion otherwise unobtainable. Hardy's understanding, his deep instinctive comprehension of the fate of Wessex peasants, told him what had to be said, but his conscious philosophy did not give him adequate means always to say it. Hence the unduly long arm of coincidence, hence the half-digested classical allusions, hence the psychological weakness. Whereas from the social understanding emerges the strength of the novel, the superb revelation of the relation of man to nature, the haunting evocation of the Wessex landscape not as backcloth but as the living challenging material of human existence, and the profoundly moving story of the peasant Tess.

"It is easy enough to list the imperfections of this novel. What also needs explanation is its triumph, epitomized in that extraordinary final scene at Stonehenge. There is nothing bogus about the achievement here, no sleight of hand, no counterfeit notes of false emotion. The words of speech have not quite the ring of speech nor the integral force of poetry; the symbolism is obvious, one may almost say crude. And yet this very clumsiness, the almost amateurish manipulation of the mechanics of the scene, contributes something to its force, to its expression of the pathetic and yet heroic losing battle waged by Tess against a world she cannot successfully fight and can only dimly apprehend. The final mood evoked by *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is not hopelessness but indignation and the indignation is none the less profound for being incompletely intellectualised. Hardy is not a Shakespeare or Emily Brontë. His art does not quite achieve the sense of the inner movement of life which transcends abstractions. He is constantly weakening his apprehension of this movement by inadequate attitudes and judgments. But in spite of this weakening *Tess* emerges as a fine novel, a moral fable, the most moving expression in literature—not forgetting Wordsworth—of the destruction of the peasant world.

#### 7. A General Estimate of *Tess*

*Tess* is considered as the greatest novel of Hardy. Giving an estimate of *Tess*, Brown has observed in *Thomas Hardy*: "Hardy's earlier *Novels of Character and Environment* deal ostensibly with past times. *The Woodlanders* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* have for their setting the years of the contemporary agricultural tragedy. In these, and particularly in the



second, the artistic purity is sullied. The weaving of a ballad tale into the agricultural environment, together with the expression of Hardy's profound and vigorous feeling for the status of man in the natural order, no longer absorbs sufficiently the novelist's anxiety, his sense of imminent disaster. Assertion tends to replace dramatic invention. In *Jude the Obscure* the earlier narrative mode is to be abandoned altogether after the opening. There, Hardy enters the lists alongside George Eliot and Henry James with a tragic psychological fiction. He responds in his own way to the tension of his time, fortified by the example of a group of now-forgotten 'problem novelists' and deeply impressed by the work of Ibsen. The desire to develop his art in this way sprang from his seriousness and his compassion. But the endeavour in fact places that art in dependence upon its weaker resources. *Jude the Obscure* has deflected attention away from Hardy's most distinguished and personal contribution to the English novel, and towards a small part of his achievement that it is easier to connect with the familiar elements in our great fiction. That part, however serious, is less distinguished, and it cannot stand comparison with the achievements of his greatest contemporaries.

"It is true to say that *Tess* is a flamed work of art, but it is little to the purpose. The novel survives its faults magnificently. The simplicity and force of its conception have given it a legendary quality. Here is not merely the tragedy of a heroic girl, but the tragedy of a proud community baffled and defeated by processes beyond its understanding or control. The resonance of the tale makes itself felt over and over again. The superb opening, the death of Prince the horse, the lovely elegiac scene of the harvesting, the sequence in the dairy farm, the scene of the sleepwalking, the episodes of agricultural life at Flintcomb Ash, the climax at Stonehenge, are powerful and original imaginative inventions. The rather tawdry theatricality of that climax, the deceptive offer of tragic symbolism, reveal themselves only on reflection. We scarcely try to understand—we feel that Hardy himself did not altogether measure this defeat—this calamity. But the insistent tenderness exacts concurrence, by a force like make-believe. The falsities, the intrusive commentaries, the sophisticated mannerisms in the prose, do only local damage.

"Hardy composed nothing finer than the opening of *Tess*, and the style of it is entirely his own. The whole invention is at once substantial with social and historical perception, and quick with metaphorical life. How effectively the May Dance evokes a country mirth springing from traditional ways and reliance upon natural processes! The three ominous visitors, one of them later to become an agent of destruction, suggest how the dance of vitality is jeopardised by the thrust of sophisticated urban life. Then the appearance of the spurious country squire adds to the sense of jeopardy. The masquerader, the economic intruder, the representative of processes at work destroying the bases of agricultural security, stands with the spiritual intruder. Alongside the image, there unfolds that of the old father's discovery of his ancient but unavailing ancestry: a disclosure of the community's past which helps to define what Tess represents in the ensuing tale, at the same time as it sharpens the intrusive and invading quality invested in Alec D'Urberville. We feel the lost independence and the helplessness of agricultural man in this decrepit figure. The art ordering the whole is marvellously secure of its purpose. The metaphorical terms reside so naturally within the ballad narrative. The preparation for such later scenes as Tess harvesting at Marlott, Tess in the early dawn at Talbothays, is perfect. For Tess is not only the pure woman, the ballad heroine, the country girl, she is the agricultural community in its moment of ruin. For two years preceding the writing of *Tess*, Mrs. Hardy has recorded, 'Hardy explored in greater detail than ever before the scenes of the story, and was powerfully impressed by the massive evidence of the decay in agricultural life.' Here is the impulse behind the legend. It dramatizes the defeat of Tess, the country girl and representative of an ancient country line, and her ruin by the economic and spiritual invaders of country life; it ends in Stonehenge, in passivity, the primitive place confirming a sense of doom which has gathered intensity all along. What has happened in the agricultural society is by now irrevocable. It is 1890, in south-west England.

"The powerful, if faulty, sleepwalking scene records the passivity and the doom more poignantly. It balances precariously between sentimentality and tragedy, yet its impact transcends its place in the story. Hardy



has constructed a perfect imaginative equivalent for the deepest perceptions which informs the novel as a whole. For the most part the narrative issues as if from the consciousness of Tess herself, impotent in the hold and motion of an alien force. She is awake and strong-willed, yet passive, stunned. You may feel that her strange passivity (she makes no effort to alter the course of events) is welded into her strength. She is the agricultural predicament in metaphor, engaging Hardy's deepest impulses of sympathy and allegiance. Clare is helpless too: a blind, unknowing force, carrying the country girl to burial. Hardy's sense of curt, impersonal powers who order human destiny, here becomes a strength to his fiction. Clare, so the narrative implies, is the impassioned instrument of some will, some purpose, stemming forth the disastrous life of the cities, from the intellectual and spiritual awareness—and confusion—of the world outside the agricultural community, and doomed to destroy the worthiness, innocence, and vitality of country life, rather than intending their destruction. The invention, here, goes beyond nostalgia. But the image is painful; all the suffering with which Hardy felt the defeat of agricultural life by nullifying urban forces, has gone into it, and the private despair of the novelist's own inheritance from his sojourn 'outside'.

"The movement of this novel, in which the tale develops against a shifting background instead of growing from one tract of countryside, also come of those desolate journeyings over the Wessex countryside. The pattern is deliberate. The unspoiled childhood and the May festivities belong to the village of Marlott. Tess's first restoration has for setting the dairy farms of the 'lush From Valley.' Her second restoration, in full despair achieving a country stoicism, occurs among 'the sterile expanses of Flintcomb Ash Farmlands'. The catastrophe is in Budmouth with its 'fashionable promenades.'

"When Tess first returns to agricultural activity after her seduction, in the harvesting at Marlott, the scenes are sufficiently impressive; the passage of her withdrawal from the field to feed her child is inspired. Yet it is spoiled by a commentary almost vulgar, as are the scenes describing the baptism and death of the child. Book Three, *The Rally*, however, sustains its power more steadily, a revelation of Hardy's sensuous

understanding, that quality of feeling and instinct with which Lawrence thought Hardy to have been more generously endowed than any other English novelist. Talbothays is no paradisaical dairy farm. Language eager with details of activity, and native to its stated objects, language rich and particular in sensuous perception, balances Tess's despair. Against the background of farm and dairyhouse, labour in the compact community, and the presence and voices of the workfolk, emerges the story of the fine young lord and the milkmaid and the three forlorn girls whose love is unrequited. To sketch it out like that is to suggest how we ought to respond to it.

"The second movement whose power and beauty are sustained at length balances the account of life at Crick's dairy farm. It records the life of Flintcomb Ash. The starting point is a matter of agricultural economics.

Of the three classes of village, the village cared for by its lord, the village cared for by itself, and the village uncared for either by its lord or itself (in other words, the village of a resident squire's tenantry, the village of free or copyholders, and the absentee-owner's village, farmed with the land) this place, Flintcomb Ash, was the third.

Flintcomb Ash directly reflects the new farming, contrasting in every essential with Talbothays. It is as essential to the meaning of the novel as the historical analysis of the opening, or the violent uprooting of the family driven out of the agricultural community at the end. And it affords an apt environment for this bitter part of the narrative. Tess's second recovery is painfully gradual, described in grave and laboured prose. The end of the movement is very moving; it brings as close to Hardy's distinction as a tragic writer. His incipient nostalgia is controlled by a scrutiny almost fierce in its anxiety. There is deep distress in this contemplation of Tess and the girls and the little labouring society of which they are a part. There is the nagging rigour of this life, and there is the will to endure and to persist and to labour on regardlessly. The writing vibrates with both.

"An epilogue to this movement of the second recovery balances the harvest scene at Marlott which was prologue to the first. Harvest tide has returned. But now the human threshers stand side by side with the invading threshing machine. The narrative-quality suggests the sleepwalking



scene again. The sleepwalker, impersonal agent of destruction, is now the machine. The sleepwalking scene gave a first impression of some mechanical force not to be baulked, once released. Now the impression grows clearer. The helpless Tess of the earlier scene is here the trapped, exhausted Tess whose task is to feed the machine. Her predicament gets a richer imagery from the group of labourers of 'an older day', who cannot resist, or accept, the new power, and who are bewildered and defeated. \* But in this second passage a dull, hard fury makes the impact more disturbing. Consider the figure of the engineer, for instance.

What he looked for, he felt. He was in the agricultural world, but not of it. He served fire and smoke; these denizens of the fields served vegetation, weather, frost, and sun. He travelled with his engine from farm to farm, from country to country, for as yet the steam threshing-machine was itinerant in this part of Wessex. He spoke in a strange northern accent; his thoughts being turned inwards upon himself, his eye on his iron charge, hardly perceiving the scenes around him, and caring for them not at all.....The long strap which ran from the driving-wheel of his engine to the red thresher under the rick was the sole tie-line between agriculture and him.

The description which follows is quieter in its manner, but the use of detail of colour and gesture is more pointed. Hardy sounds a wistful note that suggests a personal disquiet.

The old men on the rising straw-rick talked of the past days when they had been accustomed to thresh with flails on the oaken barn-floor; when everything, even to winnowing, was effected by hand labour.

Then he emphasises the less human quality of the life that has replaced the older life, an older life embodied earlier at Talbothays. Tess is powerless and passive, caught by the machine's noise and motion, unable to speak, unable to rest.

"Into this situation, reinforcing an aspect of its meaning, comes the invader, the son of the merchant from the North, 'dressed in a tweed suit of fashionable pattern, and twirling a gay walking cane.' Tess in Clare's arms as he sleepwalks, Tess in the clutch of the threshing machine, Tess before Alec D'Urberville—her predicament is the same. Detail by detail Hardy restores the environment to mind.

Then the threshing-machine started afresh; and amid the renewed rustle of the straw Tess renewed her position by the buzzing drum as one in a dream, untying sheaf after sheaf in endless succession.

The marvellous passages that follow have a sensuous force and a depth of feeling Hardy ever equalled.

From the west a wrathful shine.....had burst forth after the cloudy day, flooding the tired and sticky faces of the threshers, and dyeing them a coppery light... A panting ache ran through the rick. The man who fed was weary, and Tess could see that the red nape of his neck was encrusted with dirt and husks.

*Wrathful* takes its force from the mood of the contemplation. The *tired and sticky faces* seen as the shine break out suggest the weakening before the machine, and the dyeing of those faces reinforces that: they slip out of human expressions. *Coppery* both defines the observed tint, and reflects from the machine, holding the machine there beside their faces.

She still stood at her post, her flushed and perspiring face coated with corn-dust, and her white bonnet embrowned by it. She was the only woman whose place was upon the machine *so as to be shaken bodily by its spinning*, and the decrease of the stack now separated her from Marian and Izz.....*The incessant quivering, in which every fibre of her frame anticipated, had thrown her into a stupefied reverie, in which her arms worked on independently without any consciousness. She hardly knew where she was, and did not hear Izz. Huett tell her from below that her hair was tumbling down.*

By degrees the freshest among them began to grow cadaverous and saucer-eyed. Whenever Tess lifted her head she beheld always the great upgrown straw-stack, with the men in shirt-sleeves upon it, against the grey north sky.....And as the evening light in the direction of the Giant's Hill by Abbot's-Cerne dissolved away, the white-faced moon of the season arose from the horizon that lay towards Middleton Abbey and Spottisford.....*But Tess still kept going.*

.....*She shook her head and toiled on.*

The dramatic force with which Hardy's painful insights here find sensuous expression, is of no ordinary kind. The manner is one of simple and truthful tenderness; there is a fine adjustment between what the creating mind intends, and what the senses perceive. The truth carries over into the conversation afterwards, and to this:

The cold moon looked aslant upon Tess's fagged face between the twigs of the garden-hedge as she passed.



"Hardy sets the culminating family tragedy against the ominous background of the Lady Day migration of so many village-folk. The erasure of long local life by these contemporary migrations, Hardy perceived, was a grave social and spiritual loss. It is no accident of art that the story of Tess should end amid scenes of uprooting. The narrative of Durbeyfield's own moving from home is full of disquiet. The migration of so many others, the dissolving social order, is not particularly dwelt upon; but the ironical reception of the forlorn family at Kingsbere, its ancient home, dramatizes a personal bitterness of spirit. Only a place in the family vault, a home there, remains to the derelict inheritors. It is this homeless despair of a family which has lost its rights and independence in the village community, that gives Tess finally into the invader's power.

"The sensation of moving unresistingly through a dream recurs in the passages that describe Tess impelled towards her doom and trapped for the last time. The hints of madness are indecisive enough to leave a nightmare quality around her experiences. The situation is blurred for her; the forces that have defeated her are beyond her comprehension."

Giving an estimate of *Tess*, Weber has observed in *Hardy of Wessex*: "When *Tess* Was brought out in three volumes in 1891, neither publisher nor author guessed what was about to happen for those three volumes sold more rapidly than any other novel Hardy ever wrote. A second printing was promptly made and sold; a third and then a fourth were all sold out before six months had gone by. Everyone was talking about *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Everyone wanted to read it. Hardy was lifted at once from lukewarm distinction as an English novelist to a position of world fame. He had become one of England's significant authors and would never again be able to get far from the crowd of those who read him or from the crowd of critics whose attacks might have driven any author mad. *The Quarterly Review* announced: 'Mr. Hardy has told an extremely disagreeable story in an extremely disagreeable manner.' Henry James wrote that Tess was vile, and there were many who insisted that her author must be like her. Even those who had no quarrel with the morality of the novel were inclined to condemn its artistry. George Meredith thought it was 'marred by the

sudden hurry to round the story; and Tess, out of the arms of Alec into those of the lily-necked Clare is a smudge in vapour.' Andrew Lang, unable to express his displeasure in one attack, condemned the novel a second time in a notorious article which was afterwards reprinted. In it *Tess* was denounced 'for its forbidding conception, for its apparent unreality, for its defects of style, so provokingly superfluous.'

"Edmund Gosse was one of the few who had a consoling word to say. On the first day of 1892 he wrote to Hardy:

In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* you have achieved the biggest success you have made since *The Return of the Native*. Your book is simply magnificent, and wherever I go I hear its praises. If you could have listened to the things that I have heard said about it, by Walter Besant, by Mrs. Humphrey Ward, by Henry James, by I know not whom else, you would not,—you could not care what the *Saturday*'s ape-leading and shrivelled spinster said and thought. Your success has been phenomenal. I have not heard a book so earnestly praised by word of mouth (and that is the praise that tells) for years. You have strengthened your position tremendously, among your own confreres, and the serious male public. Let them rave!

"While Hardy was pained and shocked at the violence of the attacks and declared that if this sort of thing went on, 'no more novel-writing for me', all this publicity resulted in a great boost in sales.

"Nearly fifty years have passed since those excited days, and it is now possible to look upon *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* with clearer eyes. Few readers will be disposed to quarrel with the judgment that it is the greatest of his novels. Not the most perfect work of art; that distinction belongs to *The Return of the Native*. Not the most powerful piece of portraiture; that is found in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. But just as most critics agree that *King Lear* is Shakespeare's greatest work without being his best play, so *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is Hardy's greatest, without being his most artistic or most nearly perfect novel. Of course there are flaws in *Tess*. The Alec who 'twirled a gay walking-cane', who 'clenched his lips' and exclaimed 'you artful hussy!' is too obviously related to the villain of melodrama. The carpet that 'reached close to the sill' and so inopportunistically concealed the letter that Tess had slipped under Clare's door discloses the author too openly in the act of setting the stage. Brazil,



to which Clare suddenly exiled himself and from which he conveniently returned when the plot needed him, is presented with a disregard for the facts that is only equalled by Dickens's pictures of America in the pages of *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Let all this be freely granted. There still remains in *Tess* an abundance of Hardy at his best. Every aspect of his art and thought is here represented. Wessex superstitions and peasant folklore, delicate descriptions of nature and magnificent accounts of the passage of the seasons, humour and pathos, irony and tragedy, all are here found between the covers of one book. And here there is one thing not found in any of Hardy's previous novels: moral indignation at social injustice. With Fitzgerald he had expressed regret over the sorriest of this scheme of things, but not regret such as Wordsworth felt for what man has made of man. Hardy's humanity was never so movingly expressed as in *Tess*. It has become a critical commonplace to maintain that this obvious sympathy for his heroine is an artistic flaw, that he is too openly trying to 'edify'. But if the free expression of sympathy for those who suffer from human injustice is to be denied an author, how many plays of Shakespeare will have to be condemned! Hardy's open admiration for Tess is one of his noblest acts. In the face of the danger of almost universal condemnation, he exclaims with Shakespeare:

Poor wounded name! My bosom as a bed  
Shall lodge thee.

"Tess is an inspiring figure. Steadfast, loyal, self-effacing, brave, like Marty South, with none of the vanity or deceitfulness so often found in Hardy's heroines, with an emotional fire that would have melted any man's heart except Angel Clare's, with a fortitude in the face of adversity and a self-sacrificing devotion to others that make her the finest woman in all the Wessex Novels. Tess is a figure of tragic strength. In her love for Clare, Hardy truly declares, 'there was hardly a touch of earth.' She is beaten and crushed at last, but not until she has to choose between her own seemingly worthless body and the life of her mother and her destitute brothers and sisters. Her desperation at Bere Regis, when reduced 'to almost her last shilling,' sounds in her tragic cry at the entrance to the tombs of the D'Urbervilles: 'Why am I on the wrong side of this door?'

"Her story is a plea for charity, for a larger tolerance, for a repudiation of social hypocrisy. Its intense moving power led William Sharp to declare that no man or woman could read *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* sympathetically and not thereafter be of broader mind and more charitable spirit. From this point of view it is to be regarded not merely as Hardy's greatest novel but as one of the greatest works in English literature. It is an Anglo-Saxon social landmark. 'Anyhow,' said Hardy, 'I have put in it the best of me'."

Giving an estimate of *Tess* Evelyn Hardy has observed in *Thomas Hardy—A Critical Biography*: "Despite its lyrical qualities, and the imaginative fire which makes it glow like an inspired canvass. *Tess* is didactic: it seeks to teach a great moral lesson. The urgency and the passion which drive Hardy forward spring from two convictions. First, if writing is to be valid it must be true to life, the author must be allowed to tell his tale in his own way, to represent aspects of life as he sees them. An aspect which had always deeply troubled Hardy's compassionate heart was the betrayal of innocence. Everyone knew that seduction occurred, both in rural and town life, the only difference being that if a man's daughter had an illegitimate child in town lodgings the family were not necessarily ejected from their home, whereas in the country, tenants being more sparsely scattered and their lives more readily observed, they were apt to be victimised by the squire. Yet no one dared to write of such things, or, if they did, the girl remained a shadowy figure alluded to indirectly, or relegated to an inferior position in the drama. Hardy's sin in the eyes of professional critics was three-fold—he handled his theme at length, he made Tess the heroine of his tale, and he dared to call her 'a pure woman.'"

"Now a great and daring work raises up detractors and champions simultaneously, especially when the chief character of that work is a woman. Convention must be outraged before it may be altered. After the publication of *Tess* Hardy found himself publicly shunned, ridiculed by some and ardently defended by others. One society hostess divided her guests into sheep and goats—those who championed *Tess* and those



who derided it. As for the professional critics they called the novel 'disagreeable, ridiculous and affected', or showed their own paucity of imagination by declaring, in a phrase which now seems ludicrous, that

Few people would deny the terrible dreariness of this tale, which, except during a few hours spent with cows, has not a gleam of sunshine anywhere.

There were more of this nature. On the other hand, the critic of *The Times* described it as Hardy's greatest work,

daring in its treatment of conventional ideas, pathetic in its sadness, and profoundly stirring in its tragic power.

H.W. Massingham called it 'as pitiless and tragic in its intensity as the old Greek dramas,' and William Watson, the poet, declared that to have read it was

to have permanently enlarged the boundaries of one's intellectual and emotional experience.

The reviewer of the *Westminster* wrote :

From the beginning to the end it bears the hall-mark of truth upon every page...It is the greatest work of fiction produced in England since George Eliot died.

Yet another critic 'found—a union of the ideal and realistic which struck him as masterly' and it must have pleased Hardy to read :

Your work has much of the Greek spirit in it, and is, therefore, unique in the present day.

A feminine critic perceived that the book's value lay in understanding that

a woman's moral worth is measurable, not by any one deed, but by the whole aim and tendency of her life and nature.

Hardy's insistence that Tess, although an adultress and a murderess, remained *A Pure Woman*, was based on his second conviction. To a reviewer who questioned him on this point he replied :

I still maintain that her innate purity remained intact to the very last ; though I frankly own that a certain outward purity left her on her last fall. I regarded her then as being in the hands of circumstances, not normally responsible, a mere corpse drifting with the current to her end.

It was this contention which outraged Victorian sentiments. How could one bring up one's daughter to revere chastity if a well-known writer perverted the moral law ? In those days, when *Tess* is given to sixth form girls to study, it is difficult to re-create the prevalent emotional values, and to understand the controversy which raged round this book.

"Yet Hardy's conviction was based on the words of no less a teacher than Christ himself. 'Judge not that ye be not judged' or 'Go and sin no more', might have been placed on the title page instead of the lines from *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. When the reviewer of the *Quarterly* spoke of Hardy's 'affectation of expounding a great moral law', and *The Times* reviewer contradicted him (by perceiving that Hardy was an idealist and maintaining that it is well for us that he 'should remind us how terribly defective are our means of judging others') they were criticizing aspects of the same theme.

"In this novel more than in any other (with the exception of *Jude*) Hardy goes back to the reading of adolescence and young manhood for the roots of his mature convictions—both to the Greek tragedians, whom he had studied with youthful avidity, and to his later reading of Darwin, Huxley and Mill. To take the tragedians first : quite apart from the controversial Aeschylean phrase at the close ('The President of the Immortals had ended his sport with Tess') which was not in the original manuscript and was an after-thought, the spirit of Tess's persecution by a relentless fate or force, of the condemnation of that persecutor, and the plea for a new understanding of moral laws through the great emancipator, the human intellect, all recall the early Greek dramatist who dared to question without fear of disfavour. Aristotle said of the *Prometheus Vincit* that 'out of little myths and ridiculous language' Aeschylus had created high tragedy. Out of the local gossip and sometimes in dialect speech Hardy made a masterpiece.

"The need for sincerity which obsessed Hardy at this time was likewise rooted in the reading of young manhood. Florence Hardy has told us how her husband was forced to mutilate and emasculate *Tess* for serial publication. An examination of the manuscript reveals that the final chapter began with a



telling paragraph, later deleted.

The humble delineator of human character and human contingencies, whether his narrative deals with the actual or with the typical only, must primarily and above all things be sincere, however, terrible sincerity may be. Gladly sometimes would he lie, for dear civility's sake, if he dared, but for the haunting after-thought that 'this thing was not done honestly and may do harm.' In typical history, with all its liberty, there are as in real history, features which can never be varied with impunity and issues which should never be falsified. And perhaps in glancing at the misfortunes of such people as have, or could have, lived, we may acquire some art in shielding from like misfortunes, those who have yet to be born. If truth required justification, surely this is an ample one.

This measured dictum may be traced to John Stuart Mill who, in his *Liberty*, makes the following declaration:

Were an opinion a personal possession of no value except to the owner; if to be obstructed in the enjoyment of it were simply a private injury, it would make some difference whether the injury was inflicted only on a few persons or on many. *But the peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth; if wrong, they lose what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error.*

Hardy is clearly thinking of another passage in *Liberty* when writing *Tess*, that in which Mill questions the confusion by mankind of what he calls First and Second Nature. Mill is discussing the restraints which must be laid on the individual either by law, or opinion, to protect society—restrictions about which no two ages or countries agree.

Yet the people of any given age and country no more suspect any difficulty in it than if it were a subject on which mankind had always been agreed. The rules which obtain among themselves appear to them self-evident and self-justifying. This all but universal illusion is one of the examples of the magical influence of custom which is not only, *as the proverb says, a second nature, but is continually mistaken for the first.*

Side by side with this read Hardy's note made in the month in which he began *Tess*.

The literary productions of men of rigidly good family, and rigidly good education, mostly treat social conventions and contrivances—the artificial forms of living—as if they were cardinal facts of life.

The words given in italics in the two passages above are among those underlined by Hardy in his youth in his copy of Mill's revolutionary work.

"But the most fervent are not always the most lucid. Hardy writes with passionate conviction but his arguments lack consistency. Sometimes he arraigns the social law, sometimes the cosmic. The force which comes from single conviction and a single purpose is not his. Nevertheless we are conquered. In spite of the unreality of many of the characters (chief amongst them Angel with his unfeeling arguments and cold, sterile behaviour, and Alec, the 'twopence-coloured' villain with his cigar and moustaches) in spite of the staginess of the final setting, and the over-persistent dwelling on unkind Fate and Chance, we are carried away by reason of the book's poetic truth and Hardy's creative fervour. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* remains a masterpiece which the French, Germans, Italians, Dutch, Russians and Japanese were quick to appreciate.

"All the critics of this novel have, with one accord, taken it for granted that Tess is the victim, and not the instigator of, her misfortunes, as Henchard was his. They point to those two characters as opposites and stress the fact that Hardy pursued Tess and visited on her head, as Jove on Io, or the medieval romance-makers on their heroines, a superfluity of evils to weight the balance against her. The cry which Hardy was fond of uttering with regard to other heroines—Elfride, Grace, and Napoleon's Josephine—that it is the woman, the innocent one, who always pays, and which he here strove so passionately to express, has blinded readers to something which may be otherwise. Tess, for all her simplicity, is a subtly-drawn character with contradictory traits. Her simplicity and purity are adulterated with a strain likely to bring about her downfall, no matter what circumstances attend her—the tendency towards martyrdom and self-sacrifice which Hardy has touched on in his feminine characters in previous novels. Thus when Tess, driven almost to madness by her physical sufferings and Alec's undermining of her high resolves, finally strikes him 'flat on the mouth' with a heavy gauntlet, she is not merely protecting the honour of her



husband, whom Alec had insulted, she is giving expression to a fury which precedes her collapse before her insidious torturer.

'Now punish me!' she said, turning up her eyes to him with the hopeless defiance of the sparrow's gaze before its captor twists its neck. 'Whip me, crush me; you need not mind these people under the rick! I shall not cry out. Once victim, always victim—that's the law.'

A solitary critic seems to me have interpreted this cry rightly when he says, that

This is a very remarkable speech...it recalls to my mind T.E. Lawrence's account of his terrifying abasement before the Arab who flogged him. One feels that it is quite unpremeditated, as if it proceeded from some deeper level of the mind than Hardy fully understood...It is the cry of a passionate woman.....to her demon lover—but I do not believe Hardy thought of it as anything but proof that the docility of the rabbit demonstrates the wickedness of the weazel.

"The self-reproach which Tess heaps upon herself for her negligence in falling asleep on the cart and so causing the old horse, Prince's death, makes her regard herself as 'a murderess.' She continues to 'sink in her own esteem.' The neighbours hardly expect

welfare possible to such a family, harmless as the Durbeyfields were to all except themselves.

When Tess attempts to prefer the other dairymaids before herself to Angel, Hardy openly calls it 'self-immolation.' When, to avoid unwelcome attentions from men, she snips off her eye-brows and makes herself unattractive in other ways she exclaims:

I'll always be ugly now, because Angel is not here, and I have nobody to take care of me.

When Angel tells her that he is going abroad and that she must not follow him Tess's pride forbids her to cry out.

Her mood of long-suffering made his way easy for him, and she herself was his best advocate.

Like Eustacia, Tess prides herself that she is not 'a crying sort of animal.'

"Hardy attempts to explain this tendency in human nature by contrasting it with its opposites, the urge towards happiness. Only the word 'circumstantial' betrays his incomprehension of the psychological phenomenon involved.

So the two forces were at work here as everywhere, the inherent will to enjoy, and the circumstantial will against enjoyment.

He had already been astonished by the spirit's ability to renew its strength. In 1886, in *The Woodlanders*, he comments on the miracle:

Even among the moodiest the tendency to be cheered is stronger than the tendency to be cast down; and a soul's specific gravity constantly re-asserts itself as less than that of the sea of troubles into which it is thrown.

And in July 1888 he jots down:

Thought of the *determination to enjoy*.....It is achieved of a sort under superhuman difficulties. Like pent-up water it will find a chink of possibility somewhere. Even the most oppressed of men and animals find it, so that out of a thousand there is not one who has not a *sun of some sort for his soul*.

But he does not appear to have studied the *determination to suffer*. Suffering is endured by Hardy's characters passively, with resignation. Those who contend with it, like Michael Henchard, only destroy themselves. Yet passivity and inaction can sometimes be as destructive as action, and Hardy hints at this when he says that had Tess fled with Angel 'in that lonely lane...he would probably not have withstood her'. Her 'passive responsiveness' to all that Angel suggests, her mute obedience to his wishes which prevents her repeated attempts to be honest with him, imply the longing of a passionate woman to be possessed and dominated by a more powerful mate. But there is also something abject, something unconsciously self-destructive in this passivity, and thus, when Angel carries her in his arms, in the sleep-walking scene, she finds herself wishing that they could fall together 'and both be dashed to pieces—how fit, how desirable.' When Alec woos her beside the ancestral tombs she melodramatically wonders why she is not on the other side of the vault.

"All these feelings—of guilt because she inhabits 'the fleshly tabernacle with which nature had endowed her': of having caused her family's misfortunes by the accident of falling asleep, (first in the cart and secondly when 'she is in the hands of the spoiler'), cause Tess to sink so low in her own esteem that she commits herself to Alec's care, while secretly despising him. She then loads herself with further guilt,



until she 'spiritually ceases to recognise (her own) body as hers—allowing it to drift, like a corpse upon the current, in a direction dissociated from its living will.'

"This is the true tragedy of Tess Durbeyfield—not a girl's loss of virginity, or even a woman's murder of a man when goaded past endurance. Only a despairing soul allows itself to be destroyed by someone else, to be subtly led away from its true self, not only by the threats or persuasions of another, but by an inner, unconscious consent more treacherous than the act of any hired lackey. Hardy understands this in the affairs of nations, for in *The Dynasts* he makes an English statesman say :

*Wrongly has Bonaparte's late course been called  
A rude incursion on the soil of France.—  
Whoever know a sole and single man  
Invade a nation thirty million strong,  
And gain in some few days full sovereignty.  
Against that nation's will!—The truth is this :  
The nation longed for him, and has obtained him.*

Tess was not only the victim of Fate, Circumstance, a malign progenitor, of shiftless, cowardly or bestial people, she was also the victim of her own strong sensuality, and of an insidious need to immolate herself under the deceptive guise of benefiting others. Hardy called his portrait of Henchard that of a 'self-alienated man.' Tess is even more alienated from her true self, and the portrait of her may be called that of human sacrifice. In choosing Stonehenge as the setting of her last hours with Angel, Hardy stressed the artificial elements involved, but he looked upon Tess as having been destroyed by 'the letter of law that killeth.' I do not think he was fully aware of the significance of his symbolism, of that which he had rightly apprehended with his intuition. As Virginia Wolf says :

It is as if Hardy himself were not quite aware of what he did, as if his consciousness held more than he could produce, and he left it for his readers to make out his full meaning.

"But there is so much beauty in this book, both in the descriptions of the heroine and in those of nature, we are led

away from the contemplation of suffering, over and over again. When Hardy is moved by his creation Tess assumes divine proportions ; she is charged symbolically until she towers above us like one of the Byzantine Saints or Empresses. When setting out to meet Alec she has 'an amplitude which belies her age' and gives her a womanly carriage. When she baptizes her child, in the cottage bedroom, she appears to the sleep-dazed children.....

singularly tall and imposing.....a being large, towering and awful.....a divine personage with whom they had nothing in common

and when she walks with Angel in the 'singular, luminous gloom' of the mist-laden valley, before the dawn, she looks like 'a soul at large' ; her features are 'those of a divinity who can confer bliss'."

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